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# Philadelphia Gravestones 1760-1820

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Without the support and suggestions of a number of people, this study would not have been possible. Dr. Robert L. Schuyler deserves special credit, both for his help and criticism, and for encouraging me to pursue this study. Dr. Henry H. Glassie and Dr. James Deetz also deserve special thanks for listening to my ideas for endless hours and providing me with invaluable insights. I wish to thank Ms. Lois Burch-Gauci for all of her help with the interpretation of the forms of these gravestones. None of this work would have been possible without the help of Mr. Edward Tormay, Ms. Karen Stuart, and Ms. Evelyn Tidlow, whose help with photography and recording in the field and whose suggestions and support allowed this project to be successful.

# Philadelphia Gravestones 1760-1820

Elizabeth A. Crowell

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is based upon a case study of eighteenth and early nineteenth century gravestones in several Protestant churches in downtown Philadelphia, primarily focusing upon data from two churchyards, St. Peter's Episcopal and Old Pine Presbyterian. Other Protestant churches within the city were checked carefully and evidence found there corroborates information found in the two churchyards studied. The basic premises of this study were modelled after the study of New England gravestones by James Deetz and Edwin Dethlefsen, which revealed that patterns of stylistic change could be seen in gravestone over time.

Deetz and Dethlefsen identified three major motifs — the death's-head, the cherub, and the urn and willow (Dethlefsen and Deetz 1966: 503). Death's-heads appeared earliest (1680-1740) and were accompanied by other death imagery. Inscriptions and epitaphs appearing on these stones reminded the reader of the grim reality of death and the inevitability of his own demise. Deetz and Dethlefsen saw these death's-heads as a reflection of the beliefs of orthodox Puritanism (Deetz and Dethlefsen 1966:508; Deetz 1977:69). Allan Ludwig related the use of death's-head imagery to the iconophobia of the Puritans, since use of the cherub would have been idolatrous (Ludwig 1966; Deetz 1977:71). Around 1740 the predominant gravestone imagery shifted from the death's-head to the cherub, representing "...the immortal component of the deceased" (Dethlefsen and Deetz 1966:507). Accompanying inscriptions and epitaphs reflect a hopeful outlook, speaking of heaven and eternal life. According to Deetz and Dethlefsen, the Great Awakening and breakdown of the Puritan monopoly on religion allowed this more hopeful outlook to develop (Dethlefsen and Deetz 1966:508; Deetz 1977:71). The third major motif to appear in New England is the urn

and willow. This motif is an element of a greater Neo-Classical horizon style evident in all classifications of artifacts (Deetz 1977:117). The urn and willow differs from the two preceding styles, since the individual is in no way represented in either his mortal or immortal components (Deetz 1977:72). This stone is a commemoration to the deceased and accompanying epitaphs include a list of accomplishments and character traits. This imagery represents a more secular and impersonal world view (Dethlefsen and Deetz 1966:508; Deetz 1977:72). Thus, Deetz and Dethlefsen linked change in gravestone imagery to changes in society. Similar changes are evident in Philadelphia gravestones.

## Philadelphia Gravestones

The archaeologist or gravestone scholar wishing to study Philadelphia gravestones is faced with a number of problems. Preservation of the stones is not good. The majority of the stones are manufactured of marble quarried from a limestone belt in Montgomery and Chester counties in Pennsylvania. Because of the high limestone content, the marble has a very sandy consistency. The extreme friability of the stone, enhanced by the corrosive agents in air pollution, causes layers of stone to separate and disintegrate, making inscriptions illegible. This sort of destruction, coupled with vandalism, eliminated much of the sample.

For the student of Philadelphia gravestones, there is another dilemma — the lack of carved imagery. Why, when New York and New England have highly developed carving traditions, would Philadelphians choose to mark their graves with stones lacking carved motifs? The social and religious atmosphere of Philadelphia in the eighteenth century yields a possible answer. Philadelphia was founded by William Penn and members of the Society of Friends. Quakerism was the predominant religion, and Quaker custom dictated that graves be unmarked, or if they were marked, that the stone be small and simple, lacking carved imagery and often inscription. As other Protestant groups entered Philadelphia, they chose

to mark their burials with stones lacking carved motifs. This was done, perhaps, in deference to the dominant Quaker culture.

In studying undecorated stones, the archaeologist is forced to look at attributes other than imagery. Most gravestone studies have primarily focused upon the carved imagery, using other attributes as corroborating evidence. Edwin Dethlefsen and James Deetz noted that change in carved imagery was also accompanied by a change in the exterior outline of the stone. The round shouldered tripartite stones bore the death's-head and cherub imagery, while the urn and willow stone had squared shoulders (Dethlefsen and Deetz 1966:503,504). In the absence of carved imagery, perhaps the exterior shape or form of the stone represents the meaning usually illustrated by the motif. The general shape of the marker replaces the image as the communicator of belief. This concept shall be defined as "sensitivity of form." Sequences similar to death's-head, cherub, and urn and willow should be reflected in the general shape of the stone through time.

### *Gravestone Styles and Form*

Several styles of gravestones were utilized in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century in Philadelphia. Box tombs, table tombs, flat slabs and headstones are all present in the sample of approximately two hundred tomb markers. The box tombs, table tombs and flat slabs comprise a small percent of the gravestones in the sample (less than 15%) and commemorate the more prestigious members of the community. Similar styles of stones appear in England, New England, and Virginia, as a designation of status (Weever 1631:10; Crowell 1977:18).

The overwhelming majority of gravemarkers in Philadelphia are headstones. The form of these gravestones changes over time. Two major forms of gravestones occur with a number of transitional styles. The first major style to appear is a tripartite headstone, with a central, elevated arc, flanked by "wings" (Figure 1). The form of this stone resembles the outline of the winged cherub. This is the

predominant style of stone in Philadelphia in the 1760s and the 1770s. This form symbolizes the same sentiments as the New England cherub stone. Epitaphs and inscriptions closely parallel these New England cherub stones, emphasizing eternal bliss. As on New England cherub stones, the inscription begins "Here lies the body of . . .", suggesting that only the body remains in the earth, while the soul has gone to its reward (Deetz 1977:71). The period of popularity of this stone coincides with the time that numerous Protestant denominations were expanding in Philadelphia.

Another style which parallels the "cherub shape" stone in time period is a bipartite stone, the top of which resembles a heart (Burch-Gauci 1979: personal communication). Few of these stones exist. They are among the earliest and are very small, measuring a foot or less in height. Although they carry minimal inscriptions, the heart shape is a life symbol and the sentiments of the form seem hopeful (Ludwig 1966:160).

In the time period between the peak of popularity of the cherub shaped stone and the appearance of the next major style, two transitional styles appear. Both styles have the same peak period of popularity (1770s). The rounded "wings" of the cherub shaped stone have become squared as they are in the next major style, the urn shape or Neo-Classical stone. Style B still retains the rounded "wings" of the cherub shaped stone, however, they are higher and closer to the curved, central arc of the stone. At the tips of the "wings" are small rounded arcs. These stones are transitional in both form and sentiment. Inscriptions and epitaphs from both styles of stone contain elements of both the cherub shape and urn shape stones (Figure 1).

The urn shape or Neo-Classical stone is part of a greater horizon-style of which the New England urn and willow stone is an example. Shapes similar to the outline of the urn shaped stone appear in architecture and furniture, as does the urn motif itself. The stone is comprised of a central arc flanked by two squared shoulders as in Style A which angle off toward small rounded arcs on the edges of the stone (Figure 1). It has been

# PHILADELPHIA GRAVESTONES

(FIGURE 1)



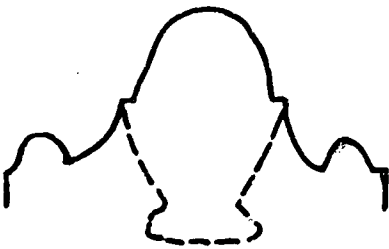
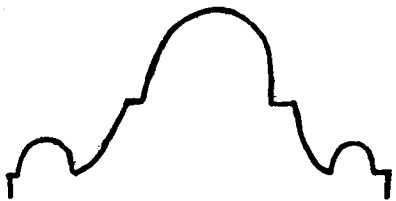
HEART SHAPE STONE



CHERUB SHAPE STONE



TRANSITIONAL STONES



URN SHAPE STONE

suggested that the central part of this stone resembles the top of an urn. (Glassie 1981: personal communication). On some New England examples of the same shape, urns are carved in that area, which seems to substantiate the premise that this form is representative of an urn. The sentiments expressed in inscriptions and epitaphs closely parallel those found on New England urn and willow stones. "In Memory of . . ." and "Sacred to the Memory of . . ." are the customary introductory statements on urn shape stones. Epitaphs delineate the positive traits and accomplishments of the deceased. As in the urn and willow stones, the urn shaped stones are commemorative in nature and express a more secular world view (Deetz 1977:72).

## CONCLUSION

It has been demonstrated that in the case of Philadelphia gravestones, the exterior outline of the stone suggested the same meaning as carved imagery on other stones. Cherub shaped stones were predominant when various Protestant denominations were entering Philadelphia, and thus weakening Quaker domination. The transitional stones are indicative of the changing world view. The urn shaped stone, as part of a horizon style, represents a national rather than regional change in world view. America as a nation chose to adopt the symbolism of the Classical world, which represented democracy, while lack of carved imagery demonstrated some deference to Quaker custom (Deetz 1978). In spite of this dearth in iconography, meaning was still expressed through form and inscription.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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